

Chapter Nine -- Ghosts and Goblins

I don't believe in ghosts, but I've seen a few. All our family did, on both sides, and in spite of all I doubt if you could find one of us who would admit believin' in them.

We saw ghosts when we were awake, an' we had dreams when we were asleep. But if anybody asked us, "Do you really believe in ghosts?" none of us would ever go farther than to quote Shakespeare:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophie.

Maybe the reason we saw ghosts was that we had been brought up on songs an' stories about ghosts.

One of the old songs Mother used to sing was about how Mollie Bawn was walking in the dark, an' was shot by mistake by her lover, Jimmy Randall, who was hunting an' fired when he saw something shelterin' under a tree, from a shower.

Jimmy ran to his uncle with his gun in his hand,
Cryin', "Uncle, oh Uncle, I've killed Mollie Bawn,

"And in my own country no longer can stay.
For killin' Mollie Bawn I must run away."

Out came his old uncle with his hair gettin' gray,
Sayin', "Jimmy, dear Jimmy, do not run away.

"Stay in this country till your trial comes on:
You shall not be hanged for killin' Mollie Bawn."

On the day of the trial Mollie's ghost did appear,
An' told judge an' jury Jimmy Randall was clear,

Saying, "With my apron pinned around me, he thought
I was a fawn."

Jimmy Randall was cleared of killin' Mollie Bawn."

Then Mother used to tell us stories their hired girl had
used to tell her when she was a girl, about a house that was
hanted by a ghost named "Raw Head an' Bloody Bones", an' that
the only way to be safe in a hanted house was to kneel down be-
fore you went to sleep an' say:

Matthew, Mark, Luke an' John,
Bless the bed that I lie on.

Then a ghost couldn't hurt you.

The most ghosts I ever had any truck with I didn't see, but
I heard 'em plenty. That was when I got a job sweepin' out the
schoolhouse, after I was a good sized chunk of a boy.

That school was a big old thing that had started out to be
another religious school an' soon died. It had been Methodist,
an' was named the Hutcheson Collegiate Institute. The buildin'
was in the shape of a cross, with the auditorium where the two parts
crossed.

There were just three teachers, Father an' Mother an' Shirley,
an' Dad kept the auditorium an' the room back of it nailed up, ex-

cept when we were having school plays at Christmas an' at the end of school, because there were so many good places there to hide, an' he knew a lot about the ways of boys an' girls. Besides, it was hard to keep it warm in the winter, with just a coal stove.

The only way from one side room to another was through Father's room. There was a little entry-way at each corner under the cross arms, with four doors. One led into the side room in the arm of the cross, one (nailed up) into the auditorium, one out onto the ell-shaped porch, an' one into Father's room.

Mother's room was the right-hand arm of the cross, an' had a light, rattly door with a good spring catch that always worked, an' wouldn't let it blow open. The door to Father's room on that side was always kept propped open, except on very cold days. On the other side, the door to his room was heavy, an' would swing shut by itself because the building had sagged; that door was so tight little children couldn't open it. An' the door into Shirley's school room was another light, rattly one, with a spring catch that worked.

School wasn't out till 4 o'clock, an' in the winter I'd still be sweepin' after dark, or moppin', or oiling the floors to keep down dust. Of course I was scared, for a lot of funny things happened around that school, when there wasn't a soul in it but me. I was always glad when some kid that had forgotten a book would come back for it, an' maybe stay an' talk a while, while I worked. But the ghost fooled me, sometimes.

Many an' many's the time I've heard it. It was always in one of the rooms I wasn't in, an' if I was in Mother's room, or Shirley's, it might start way over at the other side. Every door had

its own special sound, an' I could tell just exactly where the ghost was. Sometimes I thought it was some boy, and I'd call to it, but it never answered.

I've heard it start way down at Mother's room, an' walk, walk, walk, to the front. An' then I'd hear the door open an' shut, in spite of the catch which wouldn't let the wind blow it open. An' the ghost would walk, walk, walk across Father's room. I'd hear that big, heavy ol' door open, an' then swing shut with a thud, an' there'd be two more steps an' the ghost'd be at the door of the room I was in. But it never would open the door.

I've had it walk right up to the door when I was standing in a foot of it, an' I'd reach out an' open it. But there wasn't anything there, an' no sound of anyone runnin' away. I never told anybody about it except Walter an' Guy Camp, an' they'd both heard it, too, when they were workin' at the school.

It couldn't have been anybody, for the old school stood up on post foundations, an' you couldn't get away from it in any direction without bein' seen. An' the noises were just as likely to happen in the daytime as at night.

I saw Father in a dream the night he died, and woke the house about 3 a.m. to tell about it, though he was hundreds of miles away in Kentucky, and we didn't get word of his death till a week later.

Maybe you won't believe we really did see ghosts, an' I won't argue with you, for as I told you, I don't believe in 'em, either. But whatever it is, you can't always dismiss it just as coincidence.

Sometimes you can, by strainin' a point. You could say it was

just chance that caused Millie Swetnam to say her brother Henry was dead, when she was dyin' too.

That happened back before I was born, but Mother and Father both knew about it and told me. An' whatever faults they had, neither one was a liar.

Millie was a cousin of Father's, I think maybe on Great Uncle John's side, but there were so many Swetnams in my grandfather's generation that I never got them all straightened out. I'm sure it wasn't through Uncle Claiborne, who was a ladies' man, an' I don't think it was through Uncle Elsa, who was such an old reprobate that one of the old women of the connection once said: "If Hell was raked an' scraped with a fine-tooth comb, there wouldn't be a meaner man found than Ailzie Swetnam." An' I don't think he was Uncle Zephaniah's son.

Anyway, Millie was a young woman, maybe nineteen, the year the spinal meningitis was so bad an' killed so many people. She had two brothers, Henry an' Neri, both family names. My grandpa was Big Neri, an' there was a Little Neri, and I think maybe this one was called John's Neri.

Henry was off on a trip down into the foothills -- what we mountaineers call the Bluegrass an' the Bluegrass people call the mountains -- when the meningitis epidemic hit. He was workin' down there, an' had been gone a month or so.

Neri was the first to go, an' he went fast. An' because the weather was hot an' there wasn't any embalming in those days, he was buried right away.

It was just a day or so before Millie took sick, too, an' they could see she was about to die. She knew it, too.

"Bury me between Henry an' Neri," she begged.

"Honey," they told her, their hearts just breakin'. "Honey, Henry's not dead. Don't you know he's alive an' well, an' off down towards Mount Sterling?"

But Millie wouldn't listen to them. She just kept beggin': "Bury me between Henry an' Neri." An' finally, to ease her mind, they promised her they would.

She died an' they dug her grave beside Neri's, an' just as they got to the graveyard, a horseman rode up with word that Henry had died, too, of meningitis, an' that his body was bein' sent home on a wagon. So they buried her between Henry an' Neri, as they had promised, an' there they all three lie to this day.

You can say it just happened that way if you want to. I won't argue.

Of course, that wasn't what you'd call seein' a ghost, exactly. Nor was Grandma Stafford's dream about the white horse. But both of 'em were things kind of hard to explain.

Before you'll understand about the white horse, I ought to explain first who old Bill Collins was.

Old Bill Collins was an old Hardshell Baptist preacher, though the Hardshells didn't much like to own him, for he was pretty ignorant, and everybody thought he was about half cracked, besides.

He'd get a chance to preach, every now an' then, an' one of his favorite warnings was against readin' novels.

"For Gaaawd's sake, young ladies, never read a nuvvel," he'd thunder. "They'll send yore sooooul to Hell!"

That was when he was saner than usual. Other times he used

to preach about the visions he saw. Sometimes they were pretty funny, an' nobody ever took him very seriously.

One time he got up in the pulpit an' told the people:

"I had a dream an' a vision t'other night, my brethren, ah!

"An', I'll tell you about this vision, my dear brethren, ah!

Yes, I'll tell you about my vision, ah!

"An' this was my vision, ah!

"I dreamed I saw the Savior, ah! He was up in the forks of a big ol' white-oak tree, ah! An' I dreamed that he looked like a big yellor dawg!"

Sometimes he'd preach just as fast as he could shout till he was so worn out he'd lean on the pulpit an' the spit would run out of his mouth. An' then he'd shake his head an' say: "Brethren, they tell me I ought to take it more cammer, but I can't."

Now an' then he'd take his preachin' ideas from the things everybody knew about, but he didn't know quite where to stop.

Father used to swear that one time he said:

"Ooooh, my brethren, ah!

"I dreamed that I went out in the woods to cut me a maul, ah!

"An' I saw a grove of beautiful trees, ah!

"An' I went up to those trees, ah!

"An' when I got to those trees, ah! -- Every one of 'em was doted at the heart, an' holler at the butt, just like all you, my dear brethren, ah!"

That'll give you some idea of how people felt about ol' Bill Collins, an' how much stock Grandpa Stafford took in Grandma's dream.

It was a short while before Mother was married that Grandma

had the dream, an' she told it before breakfast, though that was always supposed to be bad luck.

"I'm worried," she told 'em. "I had a bad dream last night. I dreamed a man rode up on a white horse, an' brought bad news."

Grandpa listened till she'd said that over about twice, an' then he started laughin'.

"Well, well," he said. "Ol' Bill Collins has had another vision!"

Grandma just said, "Wait an' you'll see."

After the biscuits got done, an' they were all eatin' breakfast, they heard a man call, out in front of the house. In Kentucky in those days everybody rode horseback nearly all the time. An' unless you were one of the family, when you rode up to a man's house you'd give a whoop, an' stay on your horse till they came out an' told you to 'light an' rest your saddle.

They were all in the back of the house an' couldn't see the man, but when he hollered, Grandma turned white as a sheet.

"There's your white horse," was all she said.

Grandpa got up from the table an' went out front. An' there was a man on a white horse, come to tell them their nephew had been stabbed to death in a fight the night before.

Things you can't understand don't just happen in the mountains, or where people ride horseback. One of my strangest experiences came at Oakland, Mississippi, when I was standin' beside U. S. Highway 51, tryin' to hitch a ride, with cars goin' by right along.

That was before they built the paved road, an' the gravel road had a big bend in the edge of town, that ought to have been

a good place to get a ride. But I wasn't havin' any luck at all. The cars all just went rollin' right on by.

There was a colored boy about twenty years old, lyin' in the shade just across the road, watchin'. He seemed like a nice sort of boy, an' got right sympathetic at me standin' there so long in the hot sun. We'd been talkin', friendly, the way Southern white an' colored fellows do, an' he'd been tellin' me he was from the bayou region down in Louisiana, an' had just stopped off for a day in Oakland. But he'd got a gal there, an' couldn't quite make up his mind whether to stay or hop a freight train.

Finally he said: "Now, if you just had some John the Conqueror, it'd help you get a ride." An' I knew right then that he was a conjur nigger. But I never had heard of John the Conqueror before, for they don't talk about it much in public.

"What is John the Conqueror?" I asked him.

"It's a root that you digs in the swamp," he told me. "You chews it, an' you spits. An' it pulls 'em down an' makes 'em stop for you. It brings you all kinds of good luck."

"Well, I sure wish I had some," I told him. "I'd like mighty well to get on away from here."

Well, we talked on a little, an' after a bit he reached in his breast an' pulled out a sort of wallet, with all kinds of roots, an' leaves an' herbs in it. He sorted it over carefully, an' took out a little piece of root, maybe three inches long or a little more, an' not quite as thick as a slim pencil.

"That's John the Conqueror," he said, breaking off half, an' givin' it to me. "Don't chew it all at once. Break off a little

piece an' chew it, an' you'll get a ride in the third car that comes along."

I didn't believe in it, any more than I believe in ghosts. But I took a little bit, an' chewed it an' spit, like he said. The taste was aromatic, like something I'd once tasted in the mountains when I was a little bitty fellow, but I couldn't quite place it. It was a little like angelica, but didn't burn like it. I'll remember that taste to my dying day, if I ever run across it again, anywhere. The conjur boy said it wasn't poison.

"You'll get a ride in the third car," he said. But I kept right on thumbin' at the next one that came along.

"You won't get a ride in that'n," he said, scornfully. "Don't pay him no never-mind. You'll get a ride in the third car."

Next one that came along, I thumbed again, an' he seemed vexed. It didn't stop, either.

"That fool car ain't goin' nowhere," he said. "You don't want it. You'll get a ride in the third car."

In a minute the third car hove in sight, with a man in it by himself. "That's your ride," said the conjur boy.

I jerked a thumb, an' the man stopped an' picked me up. I waved at the colored boy as we drove off. The man was from Memphis, an' would have taken me all the way to New Orleans if I'd wanted to go.

Since then I've found lots of people who had heard of John the Conqueror, but none that knew the plant. I kept that root an' chewed tiny bits off it when I needed luck, till finally it was all gone. It didn't always get me a ride in the third car, but I can't recall that I ever did have very bad luck while it lasted.

You wouldn't call that ghosts, either. But close to where Father an' Mother built their house on Blaine Creek was a bridge that you might say was haunted by ghosts. It wasn't over Blaine, but crossed a little creek that ran into Blaine about five furlongs from the old Swetnam place. The bridge is gone now, but it was close to where Cousin George Keons lived when I can first remember, an' the banks were high an' narrow. There was an old story that a murderer had been hanged from the bridge back in the days when it was first built, soon after Blaine valley was settled. Ever since that it had been hanted.

Anyway, a lot of funny things happened there, at night. Horses would nearly always scare when they passed that bridge, an' some would run away. No matter how careful you drove, they'd rear an' plunge, an' if you got 'em to cross it, they'd be hard to hold afterwards.

A lot of people said they saw ghosts there. An' one of them was my Uncle Ham, Father's youngest brother.

He was named for Uncle Hamilton Swetnam, who was a doctor. An' Uncle Ham was a big man, over six feet, an' had a hand like a ham of meat. Most men said they'd just as soon a mule kicked 'em as for Ham Swetnam to hit them.

Well, one frosty night Uncle Ham had been out courtin' an' he came runnin' to our house, which was closer than his own. He was out of breath an' ready to drop, an' pale as a ghost.

He didn't want to talk, but finally he told Mother what had happened.

"Flora," he said, "I was walkin' across the old bridge, an' I saw something black, that looked like a dog. I couldn't place

it for any of the dogs I knew, so I kicked at it.

"It just seemed to float up in the air, an' there it was on the other side, close by me. I hit at it, an' couldn't touch it. Then I took out my knife an' fought at the thing till the sweat rolled off of me.

"Flora," he said, "I'd rather be hurt than scared as bad as that. Finally I just ran as fast as I could. For a little way it was right beside me, an' then it wasn't there any more."

The night was clear, but without any moon. Uncle Joe said he saw something at the bridge one night that scared him pretty bad, but he never would talk about it. But it made him run all the way home, an' he jumped a paling fence rather than wait to open the gate when he got there.

Nobody ever saw any more ghosts after the old bridge was torn down and the iron bridge built there.

But the strangest ghost story was the one that happened to Grandpa Swetnam when he was a young man, travellin' from Kentucky over into Virginia an' back.

Grandpa was born in 1818, around the time his family came to Kentucky, but whether before or after they came I'm not sure. He was named Neri Picklen Swetnam, for his father and Governor Picklen, who was his grandfather, I think. And after he was grown up he decided to go back an' visit the Virginia kin. He went on horseback, straight through the mountains to where they lived in the Tidewater, between the Potomac an' Rappahannock. For in those days there wasn't much worth callin' roads, even in the better settled parts. An' in the mountains it wasn't much better than trails. This might have been somewhere around 1840, I guess.

Grandpa told this story right after he got back home, an' he stuck to it all his life, an' told it to my mother, his first daughter-in-law, just before he died in 1892, a few months after his back was broken when a water gate he was mendin' on the farm fell on him. (If it hadn't been for that I guess he'd have lived to be a hundred.)

Grandpa was a devout Methodist, an' any man in the mountains would tell you his word was as good as his bond, which was plenty good. He was no liar, even if some smart-aleck reviewer is sure to come up an' say that if Grandpa wasn't a liar some of his get are.

Anyway, Grandpa said he was on his way home, somewhere back in the mountains of what's now West Virginia, one evenin', when night came on, an' not a sign of a house anywhere.

It looked for a while as if he was goin' to have to spend the night in the woods, which he wouldn't have minded much, except for goin' hungry an' havin' nothin' to feed his horse. But along after nightfall a ways, he saw a light, an' rode up an' hollered.

It was too dark to see much, but he could tell that the house was a better one than most in the mountains, with an upstairs to it. The man came out an' invited him in, an' gave him some corn-bread an' milk, an' had the ol' woman fry up some meat for him.

There was a whole crowd of children, some a good bit older'n the rest, an' the man told Grandpa he'd been a widower, an' married again.

Well, when Grandpa asked could he stay the night, the man kind of frowned.

"I'd be glad to take ye in, stranger," he said. "But we

hain't got airy room in the house to spare but one, an' some folks say it's hanted. None o' us'll sleep there, but if yer not afraid, yer welcome to it. But I'm kind of shamed to offer it to you."

Grandpa said he wasn't afeared of ghosts, an' they showed him to the room, which was a pretty good un, with a good bed. An' he lay down in his shirt an' went to sleep.

Along in the night he either dreamt or woke up, an' some-thin' was tryin' to pull him out of the bed. But he fit at it, an' held back, an' finally it went away, an' he went back to sleep -- if it wasn't a dream.

Little later on, he woke up again, an' a woman had come into the room with a lamp. She didn't say a word, but beckoned him to follow her. She wasn't one o' the women he'd seen the night before, but she was kind of nice lookin', an' Grandpa was young then, an' maybe had a spark o' devilment in him -- I don't know -- an' anyway he slipped on his pants an' followed her.

She took him down stairs an' out into the yard, an' to the foot of a big walnut tree, which he hadn't been able to see because it was dark when he got there in the night. An' she showed him a big rock at the foot of the tree.

The woman made motions for him to turn over the rock, an' he did, an' there under it was some rings an' trinkets, not worth very much, I guess. She motioned him to take 'em, an' he put the stuff in his pocket, an' put back the rock. An' then she led him back to his room an' went away, an' he went back to bed an' went to sleep.

Next mornin' he woke up kind of early, an' thought it was

just a dream till he found the trinkets still in his pockets. The family wasn't yet up, it bein' just after daybreak, an' he went downstairs an' outside -- which wouldn't have surprised any host in those days, for various reasons, what with his horse to feed before he got started, an' all.

When he got outside, there was the big ol' walnut tree, just like he'd seen it, an' the big rock by its foot. Grandpa said he studied a little bit, an' then put one of the rings, that was kind of nice, on his little finger, an' had it there when he was called in to get breakfast.

The ol' man asked a blessin' at table, an' then said: "Well, set to, stranger, an' reach to the fry. Hit ain't much, but done or raw, it'll do to chew."

They were eatin' along when all of a sudden the ol' man noticed the ring, an' he turned right white under his tan.

"Stranger," he said. "I don't like to act curious, but would you mind tellin' me where you got that ring?"

Grandpa told him all about what had happened durin' the night, an' how he'd found the stuff under the big rock.

"Stranger," the man told him. "I don't know how that stuff all got under there unless it was hid when we was havin' trouble with the Injuns; but that was my dead wife's ring."